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Every Man In His Humour Plot Summary Sparknotes

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Unlocking Ben Jonson's Comedy: A Comprehensive Every Man In His Humour Sparknotes Guide

Ben Jonson's **Every Man In His Humour** stands as a cornerstone of English Renaissance drama, a play that not only delighted audiences in 1598 but also fundamentally shaped the course of comic theatre. While William Shakespeare was crafting his own masterpieces across the river at the Globe, Jonson was pioneering a new form of comedy grounded in the classical theory of "humours"—the belief that human temperament was governed by four bodily fluids. This **Every Man In His Humour Sparknotes**guide is designed to provide students, theatre enthusiasts, and curious readers with a thorough understanding of the play's plot, characters, themes, and enduring literary significance. Whether you are preparing for an exam or simply seeking to appreciate one of the great comedies of the English stage, this guide will illuminate the wit, satire, and humanity at the heart of Jonson's brilliant work.

Historical Context: The Birth of Humour Comedy

To fully appreciate **Every Man In His Humour**, one must understand the intellectual climate from which it emerged. Ben Jonson was a classically educated playwright, deeply influenced by the Roman dramatists Plautus and Terence, as well as the Greek theory of the four humours. In Elizabethan medicine and psychology, a person's health and personality were thought to be determined by the balance of blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. An excess of any one humour produced a distinct temperament—sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, or choleric.

Jonson took this medical theory and transformed it into a dramatic principle. In his comedy, each major character is dominated by a single "humour," or ruling passion, which distorts their perception of reality and drives them into ridiculous situations. The play premiered at the Curtain Theatre, performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, with none other than William Shakespeare in the cast. This fact alone suggests the high regard in which the play was held. Jonson later revised the play for its 1616 folio publication, moving the setting from Florence to London, making it more accessible and satirically relevant to English audiences.

Complete Plot Summary: A Tangled Web of Deception and Folly

The plot of **Every Man In His Humour** is a masterfully constructed series of interlocking schemes, mistaken identities, and comedic revelations. Understanding the sequence of events is essential for any serious study, so this **Every Man In His Humour Sparknotes** summary will break it down act by act.

Act I: Setting the Stage for Satire

The play opens in the home of Old Knowell, a gentleman who is increasingly worried about the moral development of his son, Edward Knowell. His anxiety is stoked by a letter from Wellbred, Edward's witty and mischievous friend, which seems to invite Edward into a life of dissipation. Meanwhile, we are introduced to two of literature's most memorable fools: Master Stephen, the country gull, and Master Matthew, the town gull. Both are desperate to be seen as fashionable and sophisticated, yet both are utterly ridiculous. We also meet Captain Bobadill, a boastful soldier who claims incredible feats of courage but is, in reality, a complete coward. Old Knowell decides to spy on his son, setting the central conflict in motion.

Act II: Intrigue and Jealousy in London

The action shifts to the home of Kitely, a merchant whose humour is pathological jealousy. He is terrified that his wife, Dame Kitely, will be unfaithful, especially with the arrival of young gallants like Edward and Wellbred. Old Knowell arrives in disguise, hoping to observe his son's behavior without being recognized. Brainworm, the clever servant of the Knowell household, sees an opportunity for mischief. He disguises himself as a soldier and begins manipulating the various characters, feeding theirT •êv„ humours and leading them further into confusion.

Act III: The Schemes Multiply

The comedic chaos intensifies as multiple plots converge. Bobadill and Matthew attempt to appear as men of action and culture, but their efforts are consistently undermined by their own incompetence. Kitely's jealousy reaches a fever pitch, and he impulsively decides to leave his home, only to immediately suspect that his absence will allow his wife to betray him. Brainworm, now fully in his role as the clever trickster, begins playing both sides, selling false information and leading characters on wild chases across London.

Act IV: The Climax of Confusion

This act contains the play's most famous comedic sequence. Bobadill and Matthew, having been challenged to a duel, reveal their true cowardly natures. Bobadill, who has boasted endlessly of his martial prowess, is easily humiliated. Brainworm's deceptions reach their peak, and virtually every character is convinced of something false. The citizenry of London are thoroughly confused, and the entire community seems to be caught in a web of mistaken beliefs and exaggerated reactions.

Act V: The Unraveling and Reconciliation

All characters are brought before Justice Clement, the wise magistrate who presides over the resolution. One by one, the deceptions are exposed. Brainworm reveals his disguises, Bobadill's cowardice is laid bare, and Kitely's jealousy is shown to be baseless. Justice Clement, embodying reason and social order, gently chastises the fools while restoring harmony. The play ends with a sense of restored balance, as the characters are given a chance to recognize their own foolishness and, presumably, to mend their ways.

Key Character Analysis: The Humours in Action

Every Man In His Humour is celebrated for its vivid and memorable characters. Each figure is a carefully crafted embodiment of a specific humour, yet Jonson gives them enough depth to transcend mere caricature. This **Every Man In His Humour Sparknotes**character analysis will help you understand their roles and significance.

Old Knowell: The Suspicious Father

Old Knowell is governed by a humour of excessive suspicion and concern for social propriety. He genuinely loves his son but cannot trust him. His spying and scheming are meant to protect Edward but instead nearly lead to disaster. He represents the older generation's fear of youthful excess, yet Jonson shows that his rigid suspicion is itself a form of folly. His journey in the play is toward a recognition that trust and understanding are more effective than surveillance and control.

Edward Knowell: The Witty Rebel

Young Edward is the romantic lead, a witty and intelligent young man who is not actually as dissolute as his father fears. He represents the spirit of youthful adventure and social freedom. His humour is a kind of carefree wit, and he serves as something of a straight man to the more extreme fools around him. Edward's eventual reconciliation with his father suggests that youth and age can find common ground.

Captain Bobadill: The Braggart Soldier

Bobadill is one of the great comic creations in English drama. His humour is pride and boastfulness, grounded in a complete lack of actual ability. He speaks in a grandiose, overblown style, claiming to have single-handedly defeated armies and mastered secret fighting techniques. When challenged, however, his cowardice is immediately and hilariously apparent. Bobadill represents the eternal human tendency to pretend to be more than we are, and his humiliation is both cruel and deeply satisfying.

Brainworm: The Clever Servant

Brainworm is the engine of the plot. As a clever servant figure, he delights in disguise and manipulation for their own sake. His humour is a love of trickery and chaos. He is not malicious, but he enjoys exposing the foolishness of others through deception. Brainworm's eventual pardon by Justice Clement suggests that his cleverness, while disruptive, ultimately serves the cause of truth by revealing the true natures of those around him.

Kitely: The Jealous Merchant

Kitely's humour is obsessive jealousy. He is a successful merchant, but his irrational fear of his wife's infidelity consumes him. He sees threats everywhere and cannot trust anyone. His torment is largely self-inflicted, and Jonson suggests that his jealousy is a form of madness. Kitely's story is a cautionary tale about the destructiveness of unfounded suspicion.

Master Stephen and Master Matthew: The Gulls

These two characters are the play's purest fools. Stephen is a country gull—naive, awkward, and desperate to be seen as fashionable. Matthew is a town gull—pretentious, affected, and equally ridiculous. Together, they provide endless comic relief, and their antics satirize the human desire for social status and acceptance at any cost.

Themes and Motifs: What Every Man In His Humour Is Really About

Beneath its comedic surface, **Every Man In His Humour** engages with serious themes about human nature, society, and self-knowledge. This **Every Man In His Humour Sparknotes**thematic analysis explores the play's deeper concerns.

The Folly of Self-Deception

The central theme of the play is that individuals are often blind to their own faults. Each character is trapped by their humour, unable to see how their ruling passion distorts their behavior. Bobadill believes he is brave, Kitely believes he is justified in his jealousy, and the gulls believe they are sophisticated. The play suggests that true wisdom begins with self-awareness—a recognition of one's own limitations and absurdities.

The Relationship Between Appearance and Reality

Disguise and deception are everywhere in the play. Brainworm changes his appearance multiple times, characters pretend to be what they are not, and nearly everyone misinterprets the actions of others. Jonson shows that surface appearances are unreliable and that the pursuit of status based on external posturing is fundamentally foolish. The resolution at Justice Clement's house represents a return to reality, where truth is revealed and pretense is stripped away.

Social Satire and Class

Jonson was a keen observer of social climbing and pretension. The play mercilessly satirizes those who try to rise above their station through affectation rather than genuine merit. Stephen and Matthew are laughable because they imitate a sophistication they do not possess. Bobadill is a fraud because he claims a military heroism he has never earned. Jonson's satire is ultimately conservative, suggesting that society functions best when people are true to their proper roles and stations.

The Role of the Clever Trickster

Brainworm occupies a special place in the play's moral universe. He is a servant, yet his intelligence allows him to control his social superiors. Jonson seems to celebrate this cleverness, even as he shows its potential for disorder. The trickster figure serves as a catalyst for exposing truth, and Brainworm's ultimate pardon suggests that wit and intelligence are valuable social goods, even when they disrupt the established order.

Literary Analysis: Jonson's Dramatic Craft

Every Man In His Humour is not merely a historical artifact; it is a masterwork of dramatic construction. This **Every Man In His Humour Sparknotes**literary analysis highlights the techniques Jonson uses to create his comedic effect.

The Structure of Comedy

Jonson follows the classical model of comedy, with a clear movement from order

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